

Contested Symbols, Fractured Memory: The Politics of Symbolic Reparation in Colombia*

Símbolos en disputa, memoria fracturada: la política de reparación simbólica en Colombia

Símbolos contestados, memória fraturada: a política da reparação simbólica na Colômbia

JAIRO ANDRÉS HERNÁNDEZ-CUBIDES**

ANDRÉS EDUARDO FERNÁNDEZ-OSORIO***

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the implementation of symbolic reparation in Colombia, examining both State-led measures and civil society initiatives. Adopting a critical socio-legal approach, the study conceptualizes symbolic reparation not merely as a commemorative act, but as a political technology of memory governance. The methodology employs

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** MA in Human Rights and International Law of Armed Conflict, Escuela Superior de Guerra General Rafael Reyes Prieto, Colombia; Specialist in Human Rights and Public Administrator, Escuela Superior de Administración Pública, Colombia. Scientific Collaborator at the German-Colombian Institute for Peace (CAPAZ). Research Advisor at the Escuela de Derechos Humanos, Derecho Internacional Humanitario y Asuntos Jurídicos del Ejército Nacional de Colombia. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6990-8637>. Email: jairo.hernandez@instituto-capaz.org

*** (Corresponding author). Ph.D. in Law and Political Science, University of Barcelona, Spain. MA in Defence Studies, King's College London, United Kingdom. MA in Economy, State and Society: Politics and Security, University College London, United Kingdom. MA in International Relations, Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation. Adjunct Professor at the School of Humanities, Universidad Gabriela Mistral, Andrés Bello 1337, Providencia, Santiago, Chile. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0643-0258>. Email: andres.fernandez@academico.ugm.cl

a qualitative documentary review and meta-narrative analysis to identify regimes of representation and narrative authorization. Findings reveal that while victims are recognized, the current model faces structural tensions between ritualization and genuine social appropriation, and between institutional control and victim participation. It is concluded that strengthening the symbolic dimension is essential for preventing the trivialization of harm and ensuring the non-repetition of violence within the framework of transitional justice.

Keywords: human rights; integral reparation; non-material damage; symbolic reparation; transitional justice in Colombia.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la implementación de la reparación simbólica en Colombia, examinando tanto las medidas estatales como las iniciativas de la sociedad civil. Desde un enfoque sociojurídico crítico, el estudio conceptualiza la reparación simbólica no solo como un acto conmemorativo, sino como una tecnología política de gobernanza de la memoria. La metodología emplea una revisión documental cualitativa y un análisis metanarrativo para identificar regímenes de representación y autorización narrativa. Los hallazgos revelan que, si bien se reconoce a las víctimas, el modelo actual enfrenta tensiones estructurales entre la ritualización y la apropiación social genuina, y entre el control institucional y la participación de las víctimas. Se concluye que fortalecer la dimensión simbólica es esencial para prevenir la trivialización del daño y garantizar la no repetición de la violencia en el marco de la justicia transicional.

Palabras clave: daño inmaterial; derechos humanos; justicia transicional en Colombia; reparación integral; reparación simbólica.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa a implementação da reparação simbólica na Colômbia, examinando tanto as medidas lideradas pelo Estado quanto as iniciativas da sociedade civil. Ao adotar uma abordagem crítica socio-legal, o estudo define a reparação simbólica não apenas como um ato comemorativo, mas como uma tecnologia política de governança da memória. A metodologia emprega uma revisão documental qualitativa e uma análise metanarrativa para identificar regimes de representação e autorização narrativa. As descobertas revelam que, embora as vítimas sejam reconhecidas, o modelo atual enfrenta tensões estruturais entre ritualização e apropriação social genuína, e entre controle institucional e participação das vítimas. Concluiu-se que fortalecer a dimensão simbólica é essencial para prevenir a banalização do dano e garantir a não repetição da violência no âmbito da justiça transicional.

Palavras-chave: direitos humanos; reparação integral; dano não material; reparação simbólica; justiça transicional na Colômbia.

Although Colombia has been officially understood as a nation in conflict since 1960, violence has shaped the country's reality for a long time. Over the years, this has led to the identification of different types of victims and perpetrators, which in turn have created a wide range of material and non-material needs that must be addressed for the reconstruction of the fractured social fabric and national reconciliation. Nevertheless, providing reparations to the victims of an armed conflict has always been a challenge for any nation wishing to transition from a state of war to one of peace and democracy.

To this end, Colombia, which officially proposed a transition to peace with the signing of the Havana Accords with the then FARC-EP, has channeled most of its efforts into recognizing and repairing the harm done to victims through Law 1448 of 2011. This law encompasses various paths that address a wide range of needs across the national territory. Some of these are framed within symbolic reparation, an action that concerns the State and is used when pecuniary measures are insufficient for the so-called integral reparation of victims. This concept is still considered emerging; therefore, the questions underlying its regulations, scope, achievements, and implementation in the country are broad, and there is little written on the subject.

Thus, this paper seeks to answer the question: How successful have the processes of symbolic reparation been in Colombia? The aim is to provide a general overview that accounts for the relevance and impact of the Colombian State in stipulating and implementing symbolic reparation as part of the integral reparation for victims of the internal armed conflict. The proposed research employs a qualitative, deductive approach. It utilizes documentary collection and critical analysis to construct an analytical narrative that progresses from the general (international) to the meso-level (regional), and finally to the specific sphere of the Colombian context.

This article adopts a critical socio-legal perspective, conceptualizing symbolic reparation not as an isolated, commemorative, or merely declarative act, but as a political, relational, and performative process shaped by contestation regarding the meaning of the past. Within this framework, symbolic reparation measures are viewed as technologies of memory governance; they do not merely depict violent events but

generate normative effects, establish hierarchies of narratives, and determine which memories are authorized to circulate within the public sphere and which are relegated to the margins. The analysis is premised on the assumption that the law and public memory policies are not neutral entities, but arenas of negotiation and conflict involving the State, victims, and interpretive communities.

The article is structured as follows: First, it outlines the nature of the Colombian conflict and the diverse needs of its victims. Second, it contextualizes integral reparation and provides a conceptual analysis of the symbolic dimension. Third, it examines the domestic legal architecture—specifically the Justice and Peace Law and Law 1448 of 2011—alongside a comparative analysis of international measures. Finally, the study contrasts these normative frameworks with specific instances of symbolic reparation implemented in Colombia, establishing a dialogue between national regulations and global experiences.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Conceptualizing Reparation and the Symbolic

The concept of reparation initially encompassed repairing something that was broken or compensating someone, that is, leaving them without harm through an object-based transaction in exchange for the damages caused (Nanclares Márquez & Gómez Gómez, 2017). However, over time, it evolved into a web of verbs and intentions that propose the restoration of the condition an individual, community, society, or object had before a critical event that impacted its constitution and functioning in the world. Other authors, such as Orozco Sepúlveda (2019), note that referring to reparation as a contemporary term entails actions such as providing fair compensation for harm and repairing the social fabric, which aim to rectify all damages at both the individual and collective levels. However, he notes that the idea of returning something to its pre-damage state is a purpose that can only be realized in the world of ideas and must be understood as a kind of utopia. Likewise, it is suggested that the term should evolve to frame a

social transformation through transformative reparations, in which the verb “to repair” encompasses the necessary corrective measures so that the event that harmed or offended a particular person or group is not repeated (Uprimny & Saffon, 2009). In other words, reparation needs to include, within its definition, actions to dismantle the violence that caused the initial damage.

It can be inferred that the term “to repair” by itself also appeals to social restoration as an action performed to redress damages caused at material and non-material levels and to reintegrate the injured interests among human beings. All in all, despite its conceptual development, reparation has remained, over time, an action executed and functioning as a dialogical link between two parties: the one who repairs and the one who is repaired. In other words, the concept of reparation is intrinsically constituted as a moral, and sometimes ethical duty, a retributive bond between a victim and a perpetrator. In this sense, reparation is the ultimate goal of responsibility: it is the obligation to give, to do, or not to do—that is the object of the obligation arising from the declaration of responsibility imposed on the subject who, in violating a legal interest, causes harm (Nanclares Márquez & Gómez Gómez, 2017, p. 74).

Nevertheless, it is fundamental to acknowledge a recurring critique: symbolic reparation, if disconnected from material and structural changes, risks becoming a mechanism for the State to evade its economic responsibilities and perpetuate the conditions of injustice that caused the violence. This tension is central to the debate on transformative reparations, where it is argued that measures cannot be merely palliative. This paper, however, argues that rather than being mutually exclusive, both dimensions are interdependent. A genuine symbolic reparation, one that restores dignity to victims and rebuilds the social fabric, creates the conditions of legitimacy, and politics will be necessary to promote and sustain material reparations, preventing the latter from being reduced to a mere economic transaction devoid of true restorative meaning.

Supporting this idea, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has affirmed that reparation should be understood as a standard of any democratic nation, since in a territory where harm exists without reparation, the law, which aims to ensure peace and justice, is undermined. Consequently, if a State fails in this regard, the idea that resorting to

extra-legal mechanisms to redress damages is more legitimate than waiting for State action gains ground (Barrera, 2017).

The symbol, in turn, is no less complex. For this reason, to approach a general notion of it, it is first necessary to understand that such a task is almost impossible, because each semiotic system proposes and functions based on its own conception of the symbol. The analysis proceeds from the premise that symbolic action correlates with the literary figure of allegory—understood as the representation of abstract ideas through concrete attributes. However, this definition fails to capture the full scope and complexity of symbolic functions. It reduces them to insignificance, to the field of the sign or the symbolic sign, based on the fact that both concepts fulfill a similar role in a given semiotic field. Understanding this, it is best to analyze the symbol not from its similarities with the sign but from its differences, such as the close relationship between the symbol's significant charge and cultural conventions and abstract ideas (Nieto, 2011).

Regarding this hypothesis, Lotman (2002) notes that signs and symbols intersect at various points within a communicative process, as both serve a representational function. Both function as a relational bridge between an expression and its content. However, the sign posits a proportional relationship between its manifestation and its significant charge, while the symbol, naturally containing the icon, varies its function from representation to evocation. The symbol is commonly a repository of significant charges that surpass the basic correspondence relationships between figures, attributes, and signs. In other words, the symbol surpasses the sign because it transmits, almost irrationally, a significant or evocative charge, often exceeding its representation and becoming a transversal element that communicates across different semiotic systems, understanding the latter as a space where various communication processes and tools meet and interact. According to Vidales Gonzalez (2009), if a semiotic field is used for the analysis of communication and, therefore, of the collective construction of meaning, it becomes a tool that allows the analysis of a discourse or an action based on the narratives and stories that compose it, thus allowing for the observation of elements, meanings, or evocations that were not previously visible.

Thus, it is easy to see that the term “symbolic reparation” pertains, from its very concept to many more things than can be observed a priori. Both ideas that constitute the expression are potent and expressive notions that refer to complex verbs. Reparation, as a standalone term, entails a dialogical relationship of individual and collective relational reconstruction. On the other hand, the symbol serves as a representational function that appeals to the archaic, evocative characteristics of the icon, surpassing even the expressive source that gives rise to it. It is not surprising, then, that symbolic reparation is so powerful as a concept, verb, and normative action. It can be said that, in a general sense, symbolic reparation frames evocative actions, which move away from the correspondence relations of signs, to repair victims by attending to needs that inhabit planes distant from concrete ideas and closer to metaphysical ones.

The Legal Architecture in Colombia: Law 975 and Law 1448

Law 975 of 2005 (Justice and Peace Law)

This law, according to Article 1, has the specific object of facilitating the reintegration into civilian life of members of illegal armed groups who decide to demobilize. It was promoted by the government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez and approved by the Congress of the Republic in 2005, following a previous initiative, “penal alternativity”, which was debated in 2003. The latter sought to benefit the leaders of different illegal armed groups who had committed crimes against humanity in violation of what is stipulated in International Humanitarian Law. However, it had to be withdrawn because it did not contemplate concrete paths for victims to access justice and reparation (Ríos, 2017). Consequently, guaranteeing the rights of those who have suffered firsthand from the war plays a decisive role in a transitional initiative for peace (Villalba-García et al., 2025).

Law 975 (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2005) offered, at the time, an incipient approach from the State’s perspective to the needs of victims of the Colombian armed conflict. This purpose was embodied in the subsequent articles 6, 7, and 8, which specify the following points:

i) justice: identification, capture, and sanctioning of those responsible for the damages inflicted; ii) truth: clarity on the crimes committed and the whereabouts of the disappeared and kidnapped; and iii) reparation: the restitution, indemnification, rehabilitation, and satisfaction of the conflict's victims. In addition, it also stipulated guarantees of non-repetition of violent conduct to allow victims to resume their role within society. This law contemplates the term symbolic reparation and defines the key elements for the subsequent development of the concept in the normative guideline of Law 1448 of 2011, such as the needs and conditions for the reparation of victims concerning the criminal prosecution of perpetrators, physical and psychological rehabilitation, as well as the right to Truth as a mechanism for non-repetition of violent acts.

Law 1448 of 2011 (Victims' Law)

First, and to provide clarity on the plurality of terms housed in these normative guidelines, this law, in its Article 8, defines Transitional Justice in Colombia as the “processes, mechanisms, and measures of a judicial and non-judicial nature, which are employed to address the serious violations of human rights, war crimes, and crimes against humanity committed within the framework of the armed conflict in Colombia” (Chará Ordóñez, 2016). It also considers the judicial and administrative mechanisms that, through individual and collective social and economic actions, enable the integral reparation of victims of the armed conflict. Regarding the concept of symbolic reparation, Article 141 defines that:

Symbolic reparation is understood as any provision made in favor of the victims or the community in general, aimed at preserving historical memory, guaranteeing the non-repetition of victimizing events, publicly acknowledging the facts, requesting public pardon, and restoring the dignity of victims. (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2011)

In addition, its regulatory Decree 4800 of 2011 details explicitly the objectives of symbolic reparation as: “i) the performance of acts or works; ii) with a general scope; iii) with public repercussion; iv) aimed

at building and recovering memory; v) recognizing dignity, and vi) reconstructing the social fabric” (Serna, 2019, p. 13).

This law, in turn, proposed an integral reparation plan whose fundamental principle, according to Article 4, was the restitution of dignity, understood as respect for the integrity and honor of the victims. To this end, it emulated what was decreed by UN General Assembly Resolution 60/147 of 2005, including the rights to Truth, justice, and reparations for victims. This was done to reconfigure them into various actions framed into five types of measures: satisfaction, rehabilitation, restitution, non-repetition, and indemnification (Delgado Barón, 2011).

For her part, Rettberg (2015) notes that the approval of this regulation marked a milestone in the policy of reparations for victims, as it consolidated the legacy of Law 975 of 2005 regarding the rights and guarantees of conflict victims. Therefore, by 2015, it had achieved great acceptance at the national level due to its effectiveness in registering and attending to people declared victims of the Colombian conflict, thereby overcoming pre-existing gaps in humanitarian attention, monitoring, and data comparison. It also signified a significant advance in coverage, as its measures respond to the diversity of reparation needs across the national territory.

It is pertinent here to revisit De Greiff’s (2008) classification of integral reparation measures, which distinguishes two primary categories: i) material reparations, which encompass measures of restitution, rehabilitation, and indemnification; and ii) symbolic reparations, which frame the measures of satisfaction and non-repetition. This latter group attends to the needs of victims who escape objectification or a concrete action and who seek to supply needs of an emotional and even spiritual nature. In another vein, in Colombia, different means are stipulated that opt for non-pecuniary alternatives for the integral reparation of victims. Such guidelines are outlined in Law 1448 of 2011, which includes measures for satisfaction or non-repetition. The former encompasses proposals and specificities related to symbolic reparation. In this sense, one can speak of a virtue in the normative processes of transitional justice at the national level (Londoño Lázaro & Idárraga Martínez, 2024).

Methodology

In preparing this article, the authors used AI language models (Gemini AI and Grammarly) to help with the first draft translation from Spanish to English and to make copy-editing and formatting adjustments following the journal's guidelines. The intellectual contribution, including the theoretical framework, empirical analysis, and all arguments, remains entirely the work of the authors, who are solely responsible for the content and any errors.

The methodological approach of this research is qualitative, based on a documentary analysis as proposed by Hernández Sampieri et al. (2014). This approach enables the analysis of national meta-narratives that emerge from rural and urban daily life concerning the symbolic reparation of victims. The selection of case studies, both State-led and from civil society, was based on their recurrence and relevance in academic literature and human rights reports, seeking examples that paradigmatically illustrate both the achievements and the tensions in the implementation of symbolic reparation in the country. The research is also deductive, moving from a review of theoretical and legal frameworks to the analysis of specific cases to formulate reflections and suggestions for improvement.

The analytical framework focuses on identifying the regimes of representation that structure symbolic reparation measures, paying particular attention to processes of narrative authorization, the production of silences, and the hierarchization of memories. Accordingly, the analysis goes beyond a mere description of measures or mechanisms; instead, it problematizes their symbolic and political effects on the construction of the public narrative regarding the armed conflict.

This study does not aim to evaluate the administrative impact or operational effectiveness of the analyzed measures, nor is it grounded in primary empirical research. Its scope is interpretive and critical, examining the meanings, limits, and potentialities of symbolic reparation as a socio-legal category within the framework of Colombian transitional justice.

With this in mind, the research is structured in three fundamental stages: i) establishing the necessary context to problematize and compare

symbolic reparation projects in Colombia, including an analyses of violence, the concepts of reparation and symbol, a review of Laws 1448 of 2011 and 975 of 2005, and an examination of the international panorama; ii) critically analyzing specific Colombian case studies through the theoretical lens established in the previous section; and iii) offering concluding reflections based on the analyses conducted.

State-Led Reparations: Implementation and Contestation

Like other countries where transitional justice¹ processes have been advanced, and Colombia has established governmental bodies to clarify what happened within the framework of the armed conflict. A notable example is the establishment of the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH), as stipulated in Article 146 of the Law on Victims of the Armed Conflict. The CNMH is one of the main entities, along with the Attorney General's Office, the Ministry of National Defense, and the Ministry of Culture, responsible for executing projects directly linked to symbolic reparation processes within the country (Escuela Superior de Guerra, 2017). In addition to the CNMH and at the district level in the city of Bogotá, there is also the Center for Memory, Peace, and Reconciliation, hereinafter CMPR, which was a proposal presented in 2008 to the Colombian government by the Institute of Studies for Development and Peace (Indepaz), and which only came to light in 2012; that is, one year after the approval of the Victims' Law.

In this sense, both institutions must construct, preserve, and disseminate historical memory in Colombia. In addition to the research they produce, they also serve as spaces that function as museums and are therefore open to cultural or artistic intervention, provided that these adhere to the basic functions of the places in question. It is important

¹ Several countries have developed transitional justice processes, adopting both state and civil measures of symbolic reparation. Notable examples include the Monument to the Homosexuals Persecuted under Nazism (2008) and the Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism (2015) in Germany; the KwaMuhle Museum (1991) and Robben Island (1996) in South Africa; the book and film *La noche de los lápices* (The Night of the Pencils, 1986) and the *El Siluetazo* initiative (1983 and 1984) in Argentina; and the Monument to Memory and Truth (2003) in El Salvador.

to remember that it was the cnmh that, in 2013, presented the report *“Basta ya! Colombia: Memories of war and dignity”* (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013) prior to the Final Report of the Truth Commission in Colombia (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022). This report emphasizes the difficult but necessary task of producing a document that accounts for the real victims of the armed conflict and its consequences for Colombian society.

More recently, the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition (cev) and its final report, *Hay futuro si hay Verdad* (There is a future if there is Truth), appeared. It was established by Legislative Act 01 of 2017 and Decree 588 of 2017, and its purpose was:

[...] the clarification of the patterns and explanatory causes of the internal armed conflict that satisfies the right of victims and society to the truth, promotes the recognition of what happened, coexistence in the territories, and contributes to laying the foundations for non-repetition, through a broad and plural participation process for the construction of a stable and lasting peace. (Comisión de la Verdad, 2019)

The aforementioned Commission acted together with the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), the Unit for the Search of Persons Deemed Missing (UBPD) in the context of and due to the armed conflict, and the measures of comprehensive reparation for peacebuilding and guarantees of non-repetition, within the so-called Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition (Comisión de la Verdad, 2020).

The institutional framework for reparations in Colombia does not operate in a vacuum; international actors’ influence permeates it. Organizations such as the United Nations, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), and various international NGO have played a crucial role, not only as observers and guarantors but also by providing funding, technical assistance, and promoting international standards. While this participation has been vital for highlighting violations and strengthening local capacities, it also introduces a complex dynamic where external logics can influence agendas, priorities, and reparation models. This represents an additional factor to consider when evaluating the authenticity and ownership of the measures by local communities.

The efforts of the Colombian State can be compared to those of others in accounting for the violent actions of war. However, as will be seen below, evaluating a state's work on symbolic reparation solely based on these projects does not account for the richness, scope, and shortcomings of projects aimed at this type of reparation.

Supporting this hypothesis, Villa-Gómez & Avendaño-Ramírez (2017) mention that because in any society, all hegemonic powers are in a constant struggle for the symbolic control of the past—a process that crystallizes into official narratives housed in museums and memory centers—processes developed from art and culture are repeatedly present in symbolic reparation because they resist, confront, and transform the historical memory that is constructed without the stories of the victims. This can be discouraging when it becomes evident that symbolic reparation projects must go beyond symbolism and, in accordance with legal regulations, address the consequences of the victimizing act rather than the act itself (M'Causland Sánchez, 2015). That is, symbolic reparation must go beyond the symbol and focus on reparative processes through symbols that unite the community, allowing for the reconstruction of the social fabric within the framework of building historical memory and preventing non-repetition.

This is asserted by Ángel Botero (2016), who mentions that a State that prioritizes symbolic reparation over pecuniary measures within the framework of transitional justice must design projects that ensure the reconstruction of memories of the conflict, such as the creation of a historical memory center, the establishment of a memory museum, and the conduct of research that enables the reconstruction of the collective past, including the collection of testimonies from the victims of the conflict. However, it is important to remember the Colombian regulations, which stipulate that integral reparation processes, given their nature, should be developed within the framework of non-material or symbolic reparation and that, in turn, pecuniary reparation measures should be executed as a complement, as long as no other viable alternatives are found that account for an integral reparation for the victims in question (M'Causland Sánchez, 2015).

As can be seen, the integral reparation proposed by the Colombian State has addressed various aspects of the victims' needs. Nevertheless,

this text proposes an analysis and reflection on the impacts and approaches the country has taken toward symbolic reparation, an action not directly concerned with material or monetary compensation, nor with psychological or medical needs, but which, by definition, inhabits the realm of the abstract.

A fundamental dimension, often analyzed from a one-way perspective, is the role of the security sector in symbolic reparation processes. The Colombian Military and Police Forces occupy a dual and complex role: on the one hand, as institutions implicated in certain human rights violations, and on the other, as groups whose members are also recognized as victims by law, thereby fostering institutional peacebuilding models (Pérez-Salazar et al., 2025).

From the first perspective, acts of apology and acknowledgment of responsibility by members of the State Security Forces before the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) have become one of the most potent and media-covered forms of symbolic reparation. These acts seek to restore the dignity of victims and trust in institutions. However, this panorama is complicated by internal institutional resistance to accepting narratives that contradict their official history, which represents a barrier to the consolidation of a pluralistic memory.

At the same time, the Victims' Law recognizes members of the State Security Forces as subjects of reparation. In this regard, as detailed in the *Escuela Superior de Guerra* (2017), protocols have been established for the symbolic reparation of military personnel and their families, aiming to honor their memory and acknowledge their suffering. This dual approach demonstrates that symbolic reparation in the security sector constitutes a contested field, in which the struggle for memory and recognition is a central component of the guarantees of non-repetition and institutional reform.

Civil Society Counterparts: Artistic and Aesthetic Litigation

For this section, it is convenient to consider the distinction made by Sierra León (2018) regarding the initiatives by entities, artists, or natural

persons, including the victims themselves, that commit to symbolic reparation in Colombia. She synthesizes these under the concept of litigation, understanding it as the set of activities that mediate or negotiate between the victim, the perpetrator, and the victimizing event, with the objective of symbolic reparation and, therefore, the integral reparation of the victims of the conflict. For this text, two of the categories proposed by the author will be taken into consideration, namely, artistic litigation and aesthetic litigation.

Artistic Litigation

The category of artistic litigation encompasses all those activities or projects carried out by artists that aim, through their professional work, to establish discourses denouncing and highlighting victimizing events, as well as commemorating the victims, based on the pursuit of Truth, and which therefore contribute to the process of symbolic reparation within the framework of building historical memory through artistic work. The artistic action exemplifies what Moreno (2018) proposes: to realize measures of non-repetition through symbolic reparation and to utilize art as a channel of communication, artists must consider their work as an element that shapes the collective imaginaries of the community. Speaking specifically of Colombia, the work of art, as the author notes, is a symbolic act of reparation, as it resists hegemonic discourses and tends to denaturalize violence.

Aesthetic Litigation

This category, unlike the previous one, does not focus on artistic figures, much less on works of art. On the other hand, it approaches the actions the victims themselves carry out, based on their cultural background, which contribute to the development of symbolic reparation. However, it is important to mention that this modality is not presented as an alternative that supplants the responsibility of the State or even that of the aggressors but is constituted as an example of self-reparation, which, like any civil process removed from the facilities or difficulties

of the State, is usually permeated by logistical, economic, and temporal obstacles, enjoying in some exceptional cases considerable dissemination.

Regarding the above, Martínez Quintero (2013) notes that cultural products have the power to convey what cannot be expressed in words. That is, they have the power to symbolically transmit narratives that are restricted in the familiar discourses of a territory's daily life in the process of elaborating historical memory. In other words, culture can be used as a tool of resistance and collective litigation for the rescue of victims' narratives:

Cultural and/or aesthetic-artistic practices that thematize aspects of the construction of memory regarding violence are configured as mechanisms of symbolic expression that engage collective senses of the past. From this perspective, they ultimately become spaces in which victims find opportunities for collective mourning and forms of resistance to oblivion and silence. (Martínez Quintero, 2013, p. 54)

In the Colombian case, its culture could be understood to some extent as the result of the structural and direct violence to which its inhabitants have been subjected for so long. This suggests that, within this framework, cultural interventions can disrupt the national discourse and, by raising awareness of the violatory nature of the recent past, help construct new narratives in historical memory that promote peace and reconciliation (Moreno, 2018).

Thus, it can be observed that symbolic reparation frames processes that go beyond a monument or a commemorative plaque. On the contrary, they engage in activities that facilitate a transition from a state of violation to one that can be understood as a repaired state. Furthermore, an important element in the processes of symbolic reparation is the dissemination of what happened through the voice and Truth of the victims, which reveals that the reparative character of these activities lies in the process, not in the result. That is, the symbolic reparation carried out by the victims themselves, from their own needs and wounds, is a process.

Consequently, it becomes evident that, as Ortíz (2018) mentions, symbolic reparation is consolidated as a borderland work, where narratives intersect that originate from local culture, the events that occurred,

the aggressor's motives, the particularities of each case, and, above all, the voice of the victims and their transition to a state of well-being that acknowledges what happened, denounces impunity, and demands Truth and justice. Symbolic reparation navigates the tension between reparation and forgetting, often tending towards the reconstruction and preservation of a historical memory that accounts for the Truth of the events.

The Nexus of Symbolic Reparation and Historical Memory

Symbolic reparation in Colombia can be situated as a series of alternatives for reconciliation, forgiveness, and the clarification of Truth. As Albarracín (2018) notes, these consist of searching for dialogical conduits that allow overcoming a conflictive situation between a victim and a perpetrator, in which both parties opt for a peaceful, consensual solution. Furthermore, as with symbolic reparation, these must take into account the particularities of each case and be grounded in the actual capacities of the State to provide reparation.

However, such a proposal cannot be considered an indicator of the effectiveness of symbolic reparation processes within the country. An example of this is the case of the commemorative plaque in honor of José Antonio Barbosa Tarazona, who was allegedly disappeared by members of the Colombian Army in 1992, and which, as Albarracín (2018) asserts, was not unveiled until October 30, 2008—more than 15 years after the event. This example illustrates that, at times, commemorative acts can have little impact on reparations for the community. Conversely, they may serve solely as a legal obligation imposed by the State. The author suggests that this is just one example in Colombia, where acts of symbolic reparation could be becoming trivialized. Through acts or works that are forgotten in the medium or long term and have no impact on the nation, the healing and reconciliatory potential of symbolic reparation is being wasted.

Therefore, returning to the previously cited example, the delivery of a commemorative plaque by a State more than 15 years after the disappearance occurred can lead to speculations such as those mentioned

by Rettberg: “Beyond amounts, projects, and technical capacities, we must ask ourselves—and ask the victims: When do they feel repaired? Will there be a closing point to this process and what will it be?” (2015, p. 187). In this way, it is evident that the question of how assertive the symbolic reparation actions implemented by the State remain present.

A contrasting example, also cited by Albarracín (2018), is that of the Villatina neighborhood in Medellín, Colombia, where, on November 15, 1992, 12 men wearing uniforms designated for the exclusive use of the State Security Forces murdered a group of nine children and youths and instigated a brief confrontation with the National Army in a residential area of the neighborhood. In response to this event, the Colombian State implemented symbolic reparation measures that included, in addition to the commemorative plaque, the construction of a health center and the commissioning of an artistic work featuring characteristic elements of the nine victims. In this regard, the State recognized that the commemorative plaque alone would not suffice to provide symbolic reparation to the victims and that, in the interest of building historical memory, Truth, and guarantees of non-repetition, it decided to implement actions that would enable a process of dialogue and collaborative construction among the State, the victims, and the circumstances of the victimizing event for the comprehensive reparation of the harm.

The previous example may, *a priori*, challenge the question of how trivialized symbolic reparation has been in Colombia. However, it is a peculiar case, since in most instances symbolic reparation by the State focuses solely on the construction of monuments or commemorative plaques (Albarracín, 2018). Nevertheless, the construction of spaces of this nature cannot be misunderstood, as it represents a procedure that undoubtedly helps preserve the historical memory of conflicts and that, as a mirror of a past—in this case, not at all distant—also functions as a reminder to the inhabitants of the territory never to repeat the acts of violence.

However, the time lapse between the victimizing action and the reparation, the attention to the particularities of the case, and the impact of the reparation measure on the community or the victims can lead to many of the measures—the majority according to the bibliographic review of this text—to be compared, perhaps, to the disheartening panorama offered by the recommendations of the Truth Commission in El

Salvador.² As mentioned earlier, the implementation of measures, for example, through commemorative plaques or monetary indemnifications, as the primary or sole mechanism of reparation by the State, can lead to a polarization of opinions and feelings regarding state measures, based mainly on the premise that many human rights violations leave wounds or losses that cannot be quantified and much less repaired by a plaque or monetary compensation, as the case may be.

Structural Obstacles to Implementation

Beyond evaluating specific cases, it is possible to identify a series of structural obstacles that systematically limit the effectiveness of symbolic reparations in Colombia. These challenges extend beyond the simple implementation of measures, highlighting underlying issues in the relationship between the State, society, and the memory of the conflict.

First, political obstacles are decisive. The country's ideological polarization translates into a constant "struggle over memory", in which each government may seek to promote an official narrative that minimizes or reinterprets the State's responsibilities, undermining the legitimacy and purpose of memory centers and commemorative events. The lack of sustained political will weakens the continuity of reparation processes.

Second, administrative and bureaucratic barriers dilute the impact of reparations. The slowness of the state apparatus and the complexity of the procedures for implementing monuments, public events, or productive projects can re-victimize communities. Finally, there are social and financial challenges. On the social level, if symbolic acts are not constructed with genuine community participation, they risk becoming empty monuments that are not appropriated by the local population. On the financial level, scarce resources and competition with other priorities, such as material reparations, often render symbolic measures secondary, reinforcing the perception that they are less important.

² As a result of its work, the Truth Commission for El Salvador issued only three guidelines for non-material reparations for victims, including the creation of a museum and a monument in memory of the conflict's victims (Comisión para la Verdad de El Salvador, 1992).

Artistic and Aesthetic Litigation as Forms of Symbolic Reparation in Civil Society

Symbolic reparation initiatives from civil society can be understood from two perspectives. On the one hand, some emanate from the artist's production and are conceived within the framework of aesthetic litigation. At the same time, those who are mostly descendants of the direct victims of the armed conflict serve as a means of self-reparation. In this sense, both proposals reflect a similar process in which the figure of art, through the reconstruction of historical memory, facilitates symbolic reparation.

From the first category, a general example that can be brought into the discussion is the photographic work developed by Jesús Abad Colorado titled *El Testigo* (The Witness). This is an anthology of more than 100 photographs (1992-2016) in which the artist, through his lens, narrates the consequences of the Colombian armed conflict on civil society. The exhibition, curated at the time by María Belén Sáenz, was divided into four sections as follows: i) *Tierra callada* (Silent Land), which narrates forced displacement; ii) *No hay tinieblas que la luz no venza* (There is no darkness that light cannot overcome), about forced disappearance; iii) *Y aun así me levantaré* (And still I will rise), about violence against the civilian population; and iv) *Pongo mis manos en las tuyas* (I place my hands in yours), which deals with reconciliation and demobilization processes (Uprimny, 2019). While numerous similar examples exist across literature, dance, theater, and music, the following analysis focuses on distinct categories of aesthetic litigation. The case presented above serves as a paradigm, inviting further inquiry into works that function within this reparative framework.

In the second category, the research conducted by Ortíz (2018) is presented as an example, where she analyzes the musical work awarded the National Peace Prize in 2013 by the Association of Peasants of Buenos Aires (Asocab). In the lyrics of their songs, they have expressed the sufferings to which they have been subjected since 2003, when the Central Bolívar Bloc of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia forced them into displacement from the Las Pavas Estate in Buenos Aires, department of Bolívar (Colombia). In this research, the author

focuses on demonstrating how music has become a tool for denouncing violence and a guarantor of the non-repetition of violent acts, thanks to its widespread dissemination. The album *Les voy a contar una historia* (I am going to tell you a story), released in 2013, has had a national impact and has been exposed to public opinion and judgment due to the work of institutions like the Memory Museum of Colombia. All the above constitutes a process in which the affected peasants, taking their cultural configuration as a starting point, have contributed to the symbolic reparation of the entire community and to the construction of national historical memory.

On the other hand, Ordóñez (2018) presents the story of Mampuján, a town located in the Montes de María, Bolívar (Colombia), which, on March 10, 2000, was attacked by approximately 150 armed men belonging to the Heroes of Montes de María, one of the blocs of the AUC. That day, using threats and violence, they forced everyone in the corregimiento to abandon it, to later burn the houses and tear down the buildings. In total, approximately 300 families, or around 1400 people, were displaced. After this, the town was left in ruins, and its inhabitants, after a torturous exodus, began waiting for relocation, which, although expected to be a few weeks or months, lasted almost three years. After this time, Salvador Mura, a Catholic priest, ceded some vacant land to the victims for their relocation. There, they tried to rebuild their lives and homes with plastic and wood until, in 2010, they replaced them with concrete houses, funded by the State for their integral reparation.

Following this, the women displaced by the event began receiving support from the *Fundación Sembrando Semillas de Paz* (Sowing Seeds of Peace Foundation), where they learned to quilt. This technique involved cutting fabric scraps to create quilts or bedspreads. These women modified the object of the action so that, over the years, they have told, through weavings, everything that was left to them by the victimizing act. These weavings, like the musical productions of Asocab, have been exhibited by various institutions in Colombia, resonating at both the national and, at times, international level. In this way, in addition to the reparative and healing character of the action itself, the women of Mampuján have allowed the nation to learn their story. This process coalesces into a form of symbolic reparation, fostering

the implementation of international frameworks for the protection of children in situations of armed conflict (Gamarra-Amaya, 2025).

According to Motta (2018), the symbolic and reparative character of actions that emerge from culture derives from the fact that they are constituted of political, artistic-cultural, and linguistic elements, which transform an image or aesthetic statement into a discourse that evokes struggles, pain, forgetting, lives, and ideas of the victims of a conflict.

Symbolic Reparation and Historical Memory in Contexts of Transitional Justice

Colombian regulations on transitional justice, specifically Law 975 of 2005 (Justice and Peace) and Law 1448 of 2011 (Victims' Law), have recognized symbolic reparation as the set of actions aimed at the disclosure of the Truth about the events that occurred, the construction of historical memory, and the guarantees of non-repetition of violent acts. These actions aim to partially mitigate the pain of the victims of the armed conflict, facilitating their transition toward spaces of mourning and the pursuit of well-being following the victimizing event. This allows for understanding, as explained by Forer (2012), that transitional justice requires processes that aim to repair victims' emotional damage through inclusive acts of dialogue and forgiveness for social restoration. Moreover, since restorative justice relies on the repentance of perpetrators and non-material reparation measures, symbolic reparation must serve as a restorative axis within this framework.

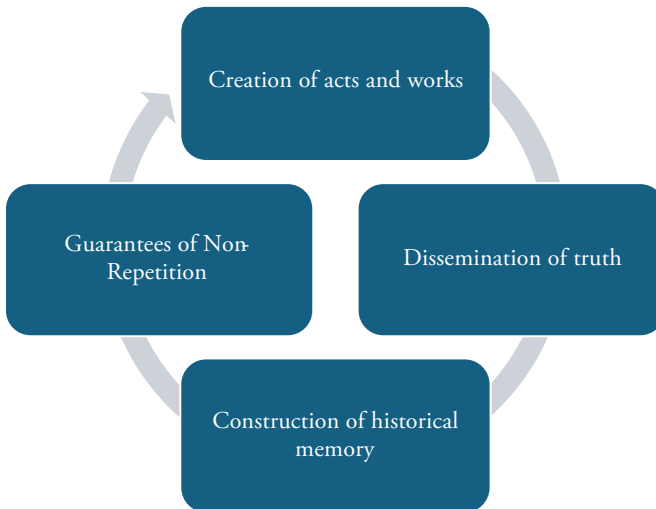
In other words, symbolic reparation finds common ground with restorative justice, such as i) innovation in the means of reconciliation between the victim and perpetrator within the framework of intimate processes of forgiveness, allowing the reintegration of victims and perpetrators into the nucleus of common civility; and ii) the importance of individual particularities for the resolution of conflicts at a collective level, understanding that the damage must be redressed to the victim, conceiving of the victim as an individual, a collective subject, and a social conglomerate. In other words, for national reconciliation and peace, reparation measures for victims based on restitution, indemnification,

and rehabilitation are necessary, as are those framed in terms of satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition (Sierra León, 2015).

Symbolic reparation, then, pertains to the victims' struggle against forgetting, in opposition to the establishment of forgetting as a state method of reconciliation in traditional justice (Monroy, 2019). That is, it pertains to the rescue of historical memory as an amalgamated action between the normative spectrums of satisfaction and non-repetition measures. Furthermore, it seeks to identify dialogical processes between victims and perpetrators that challenge the notion of *legal forgiveness*, specifically that of the State, and to reposition *victims' forgiveness* as a crucial element of transitional justice within the framework of preserving historical memory and preventing repetition.

Thus, the national normative guidelines analyzed stipulate that, to uphold the rights to Truth, memory, and dignity, in addition to measures of satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition, symbolic reparation tends toward actions characterized by three particular elements: (i) the investigation and dissemination of Truth, (ii) the construction and preservation of historical memory, and (iii) the guarantees of non-repetition of violence. These are included in two primary measures of integral reparation: satisfaction and non-repetition (Figure 1).

Figure 1. **Composition of Symbolic Reparation (SR)**



Source: Authors' elaboration.

Based on the bibliographic review conducted in this research, it is observed that, although the constitution of symbolic reparation can be understood from the mentioned elements and measures, the construction and preservation of historical memory become the focal point of other particularities and even of other actions that the reparation activity in question encompasses. In other words, the construction of historical memory becomes a consequence of symbolic reparative actions while simultaneously constituting a necessary element in the conception and development of these processes. Even so, when we talk about the construction of historical memory, what exactly are we talking about?

The National Center for Historical Memory suggests that it can be understood as a field of reflection and narrative construction, where diverse types of stories and sequences converge, generating threads that account for the past (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018). The collective consciousness of yesterday is not only a testimony of what has already happened, but concerning how a population appropriates it, it comes to life as a space of political participation as it constructs the conception of the present and orients the perspectives of the future. Historical memory, therefore, serves as a conduit that connects individual and collective history, forming the foundation of the community. However, given the multiplicity of significant events that can threaten the construction of historical memory, the collective one is particularly prone to being used to consolidate partial discourses with erroneous or biased views of reality. This is why international legislation defines the construction of historical memory as an act of dignifying victims who have been violated, as established by human rights and international humanitarian law (Mejía-Azuero & Rincón-Ramos, 2025; Torres Ávila, 2013).

This is supported by López Quintero (2018), who suggests that it is essential to exercise caution when it comes to the historical narratives that a symbolic reparation process can trigger if not conducted properly. Therefore, it makes sense to stimulate processes that facilitate the expression of the events that occurred, offering a voice to the victims. For their part, Torres and Amaya Sierra (2015) mention that historical knowledge should be approached from the so-called new pedagogies of memory, moving away from a narrative scheme and focusing on weaving

networks that speak of history as it is, to overcome the difference between what is narrated and what happened, using the scrutiny of the Truth as a tool for the configuration of a true historical consciousness that guides a people to overcome conflicts.

The relationship between symbolic reparation and the construction of historical memory is deeply intertwined, forming a reciprocal dynamic. That is, the implementation of symbolic reparation in a territory should support the construction of a collective memory based on historical knowledge of reality. For its part, the construction of historical memory, grounded in the scrutiny of Truth, opens the way to the dialogical and reconciliation processes necessary for the symbolic reparation of victims. The population can be educated in such a way that everyone, together, assumes the responsibility of reconstructing the historical memory of a territory by reclaiming the narratives and stories of the victims; an action that simultaneously functions as symbolic reparation, as stipulated by national regulations (Díaz Gamba et al., 2021, p. 39).

Conclusions

This research proposes a critical review of the fundamental principles of symbolic reparation in the Colombian context. It examines two categories of analysis of reparative measures that the State and civil society can develop in this regard. Thus, the following are key conclusions from the analysis and discussion of the implementation and development of symbolic reparation in Colombia.

In direct response to the guiding research question regarding the success of symbolic reparation in Colombia, this analysis concludes that its success is heterogeneous and conditional. Success lies not in the mere construction of a monument or the performance of an act, but in the capacity of the process to activate four key elements. First, genuine participation, encompassing the active inclusion of victims in the design and implementation of the measure, ensuring that it responds to their needs rather than constituting a bureaucratic imposition. Second, processual focus, prioritizing the value of dialogue, collective construction, and the process itself as the main reparative component, above the final

material result. Third, linkage to non-repetition, in terms of the ability of the measure to generate public reflection, transform hegemonic narratives, and strengthen guarantees of non-repetition. Finally, timeliness, understood as implementation within a reasonable timeframe that avoids re-victimization and the perception that the reparation is merely a formal and belated compliance.

It is crucial to analyze the scenarios in which the State's trivialization of symbolic reparation becomes evident. The assertiveness of implementation is frequently compromised when specific case needs are overlooked in favor of standardized responses. The generalized delivery of monuments or plaques raises significant questions regarding the efficacy of such reparative actions. Thus, the symbolic reparation measures implemented by the nation are measures of satisfaction through symbols rather than processes truly oriented towards repairing the damages suffered.

The construction of historical memory warrants a thorough review of the historical narratives triggered in symbolic reparation processes when they are not carried out correctly. In this sense, promoting pluralistic processes that facilitate the expression of events that occurred and offering victims the opportunity to express themselves is necessary. That is, the construction of an honest historical memory is supported, which stands against the monopolies of Truth that are commonly established as a result of particular interests.

In this vein, symbolic reparation should be prioritized as an autonomous measure rather than as a complement to other measures. This becomes clear when one recalls that the measures and specificities of symbolic reparation fall within the framework of satisfaction measures, but that, as has been shown, the processes driven by the State, as well as by victims or artists, address aspects that intertwine measures of non-repetition and satisfaction.

Fourth, it is found that the construction of historical memory through artistic or cultural processes is a symbolic act of reparation that proposes rebuilding a public space of cohabitation previously fragmented by violence and that, through aesthetic discourse, allows for the visualization and recognition of a traumatic past. It is an exercise that begins with memory to intervene collectively in a territory, but one that, through

its process and didactics, allows victims to transition from a painful, traumatic memory to an enunciative and creative one.

Thus, the subject of analysis and debate of this research is inclined to show that in Colombia, the intrinsic potential of symbolic reparation has not been taken advantage of, perhaps because the “symbolic” character of these actions has been misinterpreted and perhaps, about known everyday or national symbols, has been understood as a process that merely results in allegorical or representational elements, when, as was mentioned from the conceptual analysis, it surpasses these characteristics.

In this regard, the analysis identifies at least three structural tensions within the implementation of symbolic reparation in Colombia: i) the tension between reparation and ritualization, arising when measures are reduced to commemorative acts lacking continuity and social appropriation; ii) the tension between victim participation and institutional control, which constrains the dialogic nature of these processes; and iii) the tension between the plurality of memories regarding the conflict and the consolidation of official narratives that tend to stabilize and foreclose the meaning of the past.

From a normative and public policy standpoint, these findings highlight the risks of treating symbolic reparation as an ancillary or merely ceremonial component of transitional justice. The analysis points to the necessity of memory policies that acknowledge the contested nature of the past, promote sustained participatory processes, and avoid the standardization of symbolic practices. Far from offering reparation, such standardization risks contributing to the trivialization of harm and the premature closure of public debate concerning violence and State responsibility (Díaz Gamba et al., 2021, p. 39).

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